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# I am Not *Your* Felon: Decoding the Trauma, Resilience, and Recovering Mothering of Formerly Incarcerated Black Women

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## Abstract

Black women are increasingly targets of mass incarceration and reentry. Black feminist writers call attention to scholars' need to intersectionalize analyses around how Black women interface with state systems and social institutions. This study foregrounds narratives from Black women to understand their plight while navigating reentry through a phenomenological approach. Through semi-structured interviews, narratives are analyzed using critical frameworks that authentically unearths the lived realities of participants. Themes reveal that for Black mothers, reentry can be just as criminalizing as engaging crime itself. These women face dire consequences around their mothering that induce them into tremendous bouts of trauma. Existing interlocking oppressions enflame newfound barriers due to their contact with the criminal legal system—yet they survive via divergent forms of resilience.

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The questions which one asks oneself begin, at least, to illuminate the world, and become one's key to the experience of others.

—James Baldwin

**Introduction**

According a Prison Policy Initiative Report, more than 231,000 women and girls are incarcerated (Kajstura, 2019). Many of those women incarcerated are mothers (Kajstura, 2019). However, when looking at the trajectory of mass incarceration and its impact on women, it is crucial that any analysis intersectionalize its impact because the interlocking oppressions of race and class create disparities in criminal justice processing for Black female defendants (Carson, 2015; Willingham, 2011). While much of the literature does not critically tease out racial and gendered disparities in incarceration rates that are influenced by the inability to pay money bails/bonds, the Prison Policy Initiative (2020) reported, for those incarcerated groups who were unable to make bail in 2015, Black women earned the least of all groups before incarceration. Therefore, the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender that influence inequities in employment and income, also impose the same inequity in the ability to make bail, bond, and/or satisfy fees.

Although criminal justice processing and sentencing guidelines do not differentiate between men and women, Goulette et al. (2015) found that judges were lenient toward those women more akin to traditional gender roles. Research has long substantiated gender bias in criminal justice processing that favored traditional gender roles (e.g., Dulay, 1989; Franklin & Fearn, 2008; Steffensmeier et al., 1998). Likewise, research has substantiated the extent to which racial minorities, in general, are more harshly sentenced compared to white peers (e.g., Chiricos & Crawford, 1995; Spohn & Hollernan, 2000; Warren et al., 2011; Zatz, 1987).

However, as will be discussed in this work, the history of racialized gender roles and well-grounded stereotypes and tropes of the bad Black mother precludes Black women from being privy to that leniency. As a result, her status as a mother or a wife does not favorably impact her treatment at any criminal justice processing level, especially if she does not identify as “feminine”; but still may be a mother. Black feminist scholars like Collins (1999) have long articulated Black women's struggles and their (non)ascendency

toward mother/womanhood in US society. Thus, categorizing this experience for Black women as one that is racially divergent from their white counterparts. The collective plight of Black women while navigating social and gender role expectations has been one of constant punitiveness (Collins, 1999), and the same can be said as they come in contact with state apparatuses charged with the administration of justice (Richie, 2012, 2017). Consistent with the punitiveness that comes along with their gender role ascription, these tropes and labels follow them into the criminal legal system where they are likewise devalued, marginalized, and brutalized (Richie, 2012, 2017). Some scholars have lamented that Black women face a particular kind of surveillance complex that similarly situated counterparts can escape (Gurusami, 2019).

As a result, formerly incarcerated Black women and mothers continue to experience a myriad of social oppressions that are compounded by the stigma of being a convicted felon. This creates additional trauma that results from the loss of her children at the hands of the state and the further devaluation of her “womanhood.” The effects of which can be devastatingly psychological and intergenerational, triggering responses that we have herein termed *conscious traumatic repression* and *recovering mothering*.

The current study focuses on the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women navigating processes of reentry. Using a phenomenological approach, we deploy semi-structured interviews to gauge participants’ experiences and perceptions, most of whom are also mothers. This study builds on Gurusami (2019) groundbreaking work that contextualized Black mothers’ horrors as they navigate reentry. She called attention to the unique ways societal institutions constrict the free-will and liberty of Black women and mothers such that they cannot reintegrate appropriately into society. Moreover, the impact, she notes, is quintessentially detrimental to their children and their mental health.

Innovatively drawing from three critical, theoretical frameworks, we analyze narratives from nine Black women revealing distinct outcomes they faced due to their contact with the criminal legal system. The next section unpacks and contextualizes our frameworks: historical materialism, critical race theory, and intersectionality.

## Theoretical Framework

This study relies upon three theoretical perspectives to ground the analysis: Historical Materialism, Intersectionality, and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Through their intersecting premises, each of these paradigms provides theoretical context to our socio-cultural and political examination of Black women navigating carceral terrain.

Historical materialism helps to contextualize the extent to which the state operates as an ideological force of gender and racial trauma against Black women. Althusser (1970), in his contribution to this concept, calls attention to the importance of underscoring state infrastructures as potential weapons of oppression and repression against marginalized subjects. Through the historical comprehension of gender and racial violence against Black women, Black feminist literature supports Althusser's claim. For instance, ideological strongholds that construct Black femininity as inferior and subject to ridicule and exploitation (of all kinds), has long existed alongside the support of the state. Through this framework, social control technologies have evolved such that the state could influence the socio-political location, and exploitative status of Black women—and their productivity, reproductive abilities, and overall mothering labor through the absorption of evolving laws that ensured their insubordination throughout time and space. Therefore, the insubordination and brutality of Black women is a political and conscious act.

This paper also considers intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) coined intersectionality in legal contexts to show distinctions regarding institutional harm against Black subjects. Pointedly, she argues there are differences between the harms that Black men and women are likely to face as they matriculate institutions within US society. Collins (1999) offers a comprehensive analysis of Black women's oppression and struggles that underscore much of what intersectionality purports as an analytical framework. Within the context of the current study, intersectionality helps to unpack Black women participants' lived realities as socially politically situated within a system and institutions as racialized, gendered, and classed subjects. Therefore, Crenshaw (1989) argues that assessments of any kind must take account of these modalities of their existence, or as Collins (1999) articulates, their interlocking oppressions.

Lastly, this work also relies on CRT, which compliments each of the theories above' intersecting premises and underscores our analysis. According to Delgado and Stefanic (2001), critical race theory has its foundation in critical legal studies. This work will draw on two essential premises of CRT to frame our analysis. First is the tenet that racism, as a social phenomenon, is embedded in people of color's everyday lived experiences in the U.S. (Delgado and Stefanic, 2001). The second, and most fundamental premise, is the tenet of the "social construction thesis," which "holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (Delgado and Stefanic, 2001, p. 7). Moreover, CRT also purports that social and governing institutions are embedded with the influence of racism, which includes those state

agencies charged with serving justice. This framework is especially helpful when contextualizing the matriculation of Black women through processes of reentry.

Thus, taken all together, this study relies upon these premises to interrogate how racism that is structurally embedded in the law and how the criminal justice system influences the lived and expressed condition, location, and experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women.

## **Incarcerated Black Women and Mothers**

Black women are overrepresented in prisons throughout the US, representing the fastest-growing prison population (Brown, 2010). Black women are also disproportionately represented in the prison population at 22% (Carson, 2015). Moreover, Black women's incarceration rates have surpassed Black men and are higher than White and LatinX women (Willingham, 2011). The war on drugs has had a detrimental impact on Black women, their families, and their communities. While there has been much research published on the impact that the war on drugs has had on Black communities, critical qualitative research that examines the impact that punitive policies have on Black women is limited. Black women's incarceration rates had grown substantially since the 1980s when many of the first punitive drug policies were implemented across the US. For example, Black female incarceration rose 828% between 1985 and 1991 and doubled from 1991 to 2005 (Mauer & Huling, 1995; Sabol et al., 2007). As a result, Black women represent the most overrepresented group in US prisons.

Black women who are most likely to encounter the criminal legal system and be incarcerated are Black single mothers from structurally disadvantaged communities (Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003; Mann, 1995). Raising children while being a formerly incarcerated Black woman can be extremely challenging given the reality that Black women often do not receive childcare assistance from their partners or their children's fathers (Doge & Pogrebin, 2001). In addition, research has found that Black women, especially ones from "ghettoized communities," have to navigate their returns to society worrying about their children's wellbeing, housing, and education while dealing with substance abuse and mental health issues (Mitchell & Davis, 2019). Thus, their return to society is nuanced and unique.

The literature is clear that incarcerated women, who are most often the primary caretakers of their children, are more likely to have their parental rights terminated (Genty, 1988; Hager and Flag, 2018). Simmons and Danker-Feldman (2010) affirm that since the Adoption and Safe Families Act was enacted in 1997, there has been a detrimental and disproportionate racial

impact on the relationship between gender, incarceration, family re-unification, and the termination of parental rights. In their analysis they found that nearly 70% of all incarcerated women, who were disproportionately African American, either had children detained, reunification requirements imposed, or parental rights terminated. Of those women, 54% had been incarcerated and 87% had substance abuse and/or mental health issue. Consistent with our findings, they underscore that incarcerated mothers were less likely to have access to the programs that promoted reunification; such as parenting and substance abuse/recovery programs while incarcerated, and were less likely to have adequate housing, support, and financial resources that would enable them to “recover” their children, hence their status as mothers, after their release (Simmons & Danker-Feldman, 2010).

When Black women return to their communities, they often lack services to support successful reintegration (Richie, 2001). Policymakers and criminologists often paint the increasing Black female incarcerated population as individuals with cultural deficits that disproportionately engage in severe and violent crime. However, Harmon & Boppre (2018) found that drug crimes and property crimes were more of a driving factor for racial disparities in incarceration rates amongst women than violent crimes. Thus, the war on drugs has become a war on Black women by proxy. Research has found that Black women have been targeted for lower-level drug offenses more than White women and that both drug trafficking and drug possession increased the odds of imprisonment for Black women (Harmon & Boppre, 2018; Mann, 1995). The war on drugs has helped to spearhead punitive federal policies that disproportionately impacted Black women. For example, President Bill Clinton passed The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) in 1996, which limited the number of years a family can receive aid, and work requirements were added for individuals who receive aid. This new law also denied federal benefits such as cash aid and food stamps to individuals convicted of a felony offense. Black and LatinX women are disproportionately represented among the population that has been subjected to benefit denial (Mauer & McCalmont, 2013).

Disparities in incarceration among Black women are concerning given the reality that many incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women deal with societal discrimination in employment, housing, health care, and education (Bendick et al., 1994; Lipitz, 2011; Ocen, 2012; Ortiz, 2014; Roscigno et al., 2009). Thus, their experiences with the criminal legal system are similar to their experiences with other oppressive institutions. Black women who are incarcerated are more likely than men to be HIV positive and to suffer from mental illness and substance abuse (Carson, 2015). These unique challenges

make the reintegration process for Black women incredibly nuanced and difficult. Also, Black women are more likely than men to be the sole providers in their households before incarceration (Brown, 2010). Thus, navigating a return to society while also providing for their children and potentially regaining custody can severely hinder Black women's successful reintegration. Playing an active role in their children's lives is essential because research finds that Black women who experience child custody loss are more likely to engage in crime (Harp & Oser, 2018).

As Black women return to society after incarceration, they are often met with hyper-surveillance under the state that limits their ability to matriculate through society as free individuals (Gurusami, 2019). Surveillance under the state often limits their ability to provide for themselves and their families (Gurusami, 2019). Also, employment prospects for formerly incarcerated Black women are bleak. Ortiz (2014) found that white formerly incarcerated women have more favorable experiences finding employment after incarceration than Black women. Moreover, Black women are more likely than white women to return to communities dealing with structural disadvantage, which increases their likelihood of interfacing with the state, resulting in a violation of probation or parole and a return to prison (Lipitz, 2011). Black women returning to underserved and disadvantaged communities is concerning given the reality that racial discrimination increases Black women's likelihood to offend (Burt & Simmons, 2015). Black women's motherhood abilities are often under constant surveillance by the state. Black women are marginalized and often demonized as unfit mothers who are overly reliant on state resources (Hancock, 2004). Thus, Black women are often seen as individuals who are incapable of supporting themselves and their families and in need of state intervention by the criminal legal system or Child Protective Services (Roberts, 2012). Navigating society as a formerly incarcerated Black woman can be extremely stressful and challenging, and the mark of a criminal record often compounds their marginality in society. Garcia-Hallett (2019) found that some Black formerly incarcerated women believe the criminal legal system is set up to fail them. They also believed the extra stigma associated with being formerly incarcerated substantially limits their ability to achieve proper reintegration, given that society is less forgiving of Black women. Thus, Black women's experiences navigating reentry are complex and unique; therefore, criminological research that examines Black women's experiences with the criminal legal system must foreground the lived experiences of system impacted Black women. Criminologists must utilize an intersectional approach to understand better Black women's challenges navigating reentry (Potter, 2015).



## **Navigating Resilience While Under State Supervision**

Research continues to report that peer influence has a unique role in impacting criminal desistance (Bahr et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2013). Nevertheless, desistance from crime has racial and gendered dimensions plagued by socio-political impediments that Black women would otherwise face had they not come into contact with the criminal legal system. Moreover, Bahr et al. (2010) found that women who engaged in positive activities with friends and family and gainful employment were more likely to navigate parole successfully. However, for Black women, whose social support networks are largely derailed and painted by structural barriers, are often without the possibility of having sizeable positive peer support systems on whom they can rely. Moreover, research has also lamented the importance of prosocial friendships. Parsons and Warner-Robbins (2002) found that those who surround themselves in positive friend circles can better cope with their challenging life struggles. Jiang and Winfree (2006) reported that since women are more family (and child) oriented than men, contact with family during incarceration allows them to maintain a sense of hope and connection.

Some scholars report women wanting help while incarcerated. For example, regarding the death of children, Kaplan (1989) found that an in-prison support group served as an anti-isolation mechanism for women inside who fell under the circumstances of losing a child. Additionally, for those whose children may still be alive, Miller (2006) argued that their children would bear an enormous burden. Indeed, the burden that these children carry is not lost on the mothers as they often matriculate long prison sentences that are not taken to account by the criminal legal system (Hairston, 2003). Nevertheless, nearly 80% of women behind bars are mothers (Kajstura, 2019), and for many of them, they inevitably face the prospect of their children being placed in foster care (Hairston, 2003). Since many of these women were primary caretakers of their children, being incarcerated puts them and their children at severe risk of being forever disjointed (Margolies & Kraft-Stolar, 2006), which can potentially do irreparable harm to the children who committed no crime. Raeder (2006) posits that children of incarcerated mothers will face long-term traumas that will far surpass their mothers' traumas. Some of the behavioral developments may include abandonment issues, lower self-esteem, anti-social disorders, shamefulness, and emotional detachment disorders (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Bui and Morash (2010) emphasized that prison programming could go a long way toward promoting prosocial connections such that women can be better connected and productive once released. Given the high

percentage of mothers behind bars, mothering and reunification programs would likely be most impactful.

Aniefuna et al. (2020) lamented that forms of state violence (covertly or overtly) designed to pit Black women against their children are an attempt to delegitimize Black women's role as mothers in the eyes of their children. In their study, they recognized how policing Black motherhood in Baltimore, Maryland, served as a tool of disconnecting mothers from their children—such that policing could be contextualized as a brainwashing technique to reposition Black mothers as criminal, unfit, and undeserving of love in the eyes of their children. According to Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010), the social stigma associated from long-term loss of a parent via incarceration may very well have the same effects as policing of Black mothers under the context of the previously mentioned study, as children begin to develop a sterner distaste for their mother due to her prolonged absence while incarcerated.

In her seminal book, *Resisting State Violence Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture*, James (1996) has written about the spectacle of erasing racialized state violence. Through the covert system of mass incarceration, and its impact on Black women (and their offspring), an immense erasure lays bare. In her book, James unpacks Foucault's understanding of the body. She brilliantly intersectionalizes the body as a multidimensional being existent within a racial and socio-political context far beyond the narrowly defined white heteropatriarchal prototype imagined by Foucault. Essentially, she departs from Foucault by accentuating that not all bodies are treated the same by the disciplinary—that some are targeted for different reasons. Identifiers beyond the stale, docile neutralized body, indeed matter—race, gender, sexuality, age, geography (among others), play fundamental roles in disciplining marginalized bodies in some geographical spaces. James argues, Foucault missed the mark. When one centers the historical penology of Black women in the US alongside contemporary mass incarceration and its unfortunate impact on their offspring, James' arguments are most influential.

Hayes et al. (2020) argued that mass incarceration is a driver of reproductive oppression. For instance, writing:

Mass incarceration, by its very nature, compromises and undermines bodily autonomy and the capacity for incarcerated people to make decisions about their reproductive wellbeing and bodies; this is done through institutionalized racism and is disproportionately done to the bodies of women of color. This violates the most basic tenets of reproductive justice—the right to have a child, not to have a child, and to parent the children you have with dignity and in safety (p. s21).

James (1996) would indeed agree as her work argues that the mass incarceration of Black women and its impact is an egregious form of state violence that has historical grounding with roots during slavery. Roberts (1997) historical accounting of Black motherhood as a violent pursuit from slavery until the contemporary era is riveting and foundational. For instance, tracing the state's infatuation with Black women parenting, she laments that Black motherhood is criminalizing. Roberts believes that Black motherhood's criminalization in conjunction with broader racial-gender discrimination places them at an increased likelihood of criminal legal system involvement for issues that involve their children—typically an experience that Black fathers avoid en masse.

Nevertheless, these criminalizing tactics alongside broader social control mechanisms such as the war on drugs and mandatory minimums led to the increasing numbers of Black women in the system starting in the 1990s (Chesney-Lind, 2002). Also, the repealing of draconian laws such as the New York Rockefeller laws and the alike did not halt Black women and other women from being mass incarcerated; instead, the state sought to criminalize the conditions or reasons that led them into the system (Chesney-Lind, 2002).

However, Hayes et al. (2020) refocus attention on mass incarceration's inhumanity, articulating how prison is itself a system of reproductive oppression. They state that “[w]omen behind bars have been largely eclipsed in broader discussion on health care for incarcerated people, criminal legal system reform and critiques of the negative impact of incarceration on health status and outcomes” (p. S22). Moreover, included in these arguments is the reality that women are denied their right to give birth while incarcerated. As women are given harsher sentencing today, their maternal clocks are forced to run out, thus depleting them the opportunity to bear children. This collateral consequence of incarceration is disproportionately logged against Black women, who already face an assortment of reproductive inequalities and oppression. Thus, through this prism, the carceral state dominates even the wombs of those who would be mothers through forceful sexual and reproductive isolation interventions.

Roberts (1997) necessarily foregrounds the mistreatment of Black women bodies in US enslavement. During slavery, Black women's bodies were treated like that of inanimate objects—to be used and abused. Under enslavement, their bodies were child-bearing machines, for the profiteering of mainly white men and their families. On slave plantations, Black women faced a litany of violence against their bodies, mainly from white men, but sometimes from white women and Black men. However, the construction of Black women's bodies as less superior against that of whites, and as pain absorbable is part and parcel of a history of tremendous trauma and violence that they have had to endure throughout centuries. The violence ushered against Black

women via technologies of mass incarceration today is the reification of old technologies made anew (Alexander, 2010). Critical research has continued to show how the state responds to Black women's bodies with utmost punitiveness and disregard, even in cases in which they are victims (Richie, 2012, 2017).

Thus, the prolonged punishment and preoccupation with state-sanctioned violence against Black women's bodies may be rendered ideological (e.g., Williams & Battle, 2017). While Black women have always resisted violence of all kinds, institutions have always pushed back, ensuring that they remained "in their place" (Berry & Gross, 2020; James, 1996). Some scholars have insisted that Black women have often fallen within the "dangerous classes" precisely because of their socio-political location (Shelden & Vasiliev, 2017) or interlocking oppressions (Collins, 1999). Nevertheless, resilience has been one such mechanism used since enslavement in the US to keep Black women afloat and connected to their roots (Collins, 1999). Through the development of resistance movements and struggles, Black women have developed a mantra within which to survive white supremacy and its appertaining violence, which often includes violence from their communities (Collins, 1999).

Berry and Gross (2020) contextualize the essence of Black women's resilience through a retelling of US history from Black women's perspective. Consistent with Collins (1999) and other literature around Black women's constant struggle, Berry and Gross (2020) paint a picture of divergent coping mechanisms and triumphs. The ability to navigate a society not meant to include Black women has often painted them as superwomen, discounting the real mental and physiological harms that such perseverance does to their bodies (Collins, 1999). As such, resilience has ironically meant also absorbing immense pain and disease, often the kinds that are silent yet equally deadly as those that are obvious. Religion and spirituality have long been one such outlet that has held Black women together during times of struggle and perseverance, mainly when they are disabled by health abnormalities (Collins, 1999; Eugene, 1995). As Eugene (1995) so comprehensively dictates, Black women are likely to develop immense mental strain while delving through their interlocking oppressions. The current study contextualizes the likelihood of these suppositions alongside those women who are also navigating reentry.

## **Black Women Bodies as a Historical Carceral Subject**

Black women occupy a unique position in history that must be included in the contemporary analyses of their placement in prison. During the Antebellum Era, the objectification and commodification of the Black woman's body not

only provided value to the plantation but it was vital to the growth of the agricultural economy that was pivotal to the development of capitalism in the US (Bernard, 2016; Collins, 1999; Mancini, 1996). The vestiges of enslavement, and later Jim Crow, created the condition wherein Black women's bodies, as sites of both productive and sexual/reproductive labor, were objectified by ideological propaganda and institutionalized through slave codes, as tools of production, property, commodities, and reproducers of the same (Collins, 2005; hooks, 2014; Prather et al., 2018). Meanwhile, her physical, reproductive, and mothering labor was exploited to enhance the institution of enslavement (Collins, 1999).

The hegemonic ideologies and stereotypes of inhumanity, savagery, masculine aggression, hyper-sexuality, and inferiority (Collins, 2000, 2005; Wallace, 2015) served to justify the brutal conditions that enslaved Black women (hooks, 1986, 2014). In her pivotal work, *Ain't I a Woman*, hooks (2014) points out, "sexism was an integral part of the social and political order white colonizers brought with them from their European homeland, and it was to have a grave impact on the fate of enslaved black women" (p. 15). The interlocking oppression of race and gender systematically separated Black women from traditional notions of "femininity" and the "cult of true womanhood," which were fundamental to the patriarchal privileges and protections that were afforded to white (middle class) women (Collins 1999, 2005; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1986, 2014; Young and Spencer, 2007).

The hegemonic white supremacist and patriarchal stereotypes of Black women that have historically presented through jezebel imagery and ideology created an antithetical condition for them, which justified the harsh and brutal treatment they received (hooks, 1986, 2014). The institution of enslavement itself deprived Black women of all social constructs that characterized femininity and womanhood, which included a degree of social control over her body, sexual and intimate labor, her spiritual wellbeing, reproduction and childbirth, and most significantly, her subjective and relational role as a mother (Spencer, 2011; Gross, 2015). This included her most fundamental ability to choose how, when, and with whom she engages sexually, procreates, and her ability to secure and control her children's wellbeing, health, safety, and destiny.

While the Thirteenth Amendment may have codified the emancipation of the enslaved, its out-clause, "except as a punishment for a crime whereby an individual has been duly convicted," provided the foundation for a new form of re-enslavement through the new institutionalization of black codes and convict leasing systems that further served to sustain the agricultural production necessary for the US' productive shift to the industrial revolution. While the vast majority of literature on the convict leasing system (Alexander,

2010; Blackmon, 2008; Kendi, 2016; Muller, 2018) either focuses on a general critique of the system or its impact on Black men, significant contributions like Davis (1981) and works like LeFlouria's (2015), *Chained in Silence*, interrogate how Black women were also "silently" affected by these new institutions.

Despite intense white resistance to the growth of Blacks post-emancipation, the continued removal of Black women's offspring through the Black codes and convict leasing systems resulted in the high numbers of orphaned Black youth who became "wards of the state." This transaction also gave the state and counties the legal control to sell and trade Black youth into the convict leasing system (Blackmon, 2008; Lichtenstein, 1996; Mancini, 1996). Therefore, the shift did not eradicate dependence on or control over Black women's reproductive labor or plantocracy control over her mothering but instead created another condition by which the state could exploit it. Therefore, the contemporary socio-political analysis of Black women in the carceral state cannot be divorced from the historical context from which the location of Black women in the carceral state—be it bondage during enslavement, the convict leasing system, or mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex today—emerges.

## Methods

### *Procedures and Recruitment*

Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling methodology utilizing a local agency in the Northeastern US that engages in reentry services. Those who voluntarily engaged the study signed consent forms and received a \$10 CVS or Walgreens gift card for their participation. We deployed semi-structured interview guides that helped to gauge participant experiences and perceptions navigating pre and post-incarceration. Semi-structured interviews are useful for optimal open-ended exposure, such that interviewees may engage as openly as possible (Tracy, 2020). In fact, at times, participants took control over the trajectory of the conversation, thus, producing intensely rich textual data consistent with this method. Interviews lasted about 30 min on average. Consistent with purposive sampling, participants were given flyers and kindly asked to refer others if they so choose but were told they were not mandated to send referrals. Purposive sampling is used when one is trying to reach hard-to-reach populations (Bhattacharya, 2010). Current participants would readily fall within this area because of their multiple axes of marginalization. Understandable hesitation exists in Black communities against researchers from academia (and other outside spaces); therefore, a gatekeeper

or validation is typically necessary. Besides interviews, we utilized a demographic form to collect additional relevant data points (to be explained in the next section). Other potential data points consistent with observation were captured, including overt/silent gestures or other relevant dispositional characteristics about participants.

A total of nine participants were sought for the current study as a result of researching saturation. According to Creswell (2013), saturation is reached precisely when qualitative data procurement becomes repetitive in nature and the expectation of acquiring new perspectives is unlikely. Throughout the collection process we carefully gauged, via careful preliminary analysis, what participants were lamenting and how their narratives fit within our overall research objectives and goals. As a research team, we utilized a narrative analysis within the context of our phenomenological approach to analyze interview transcripts and identify emergent themes. Therein, we sifted through narratives independently before coming together on three separate 2-hr calls to concretize themes.

First, we engaged open coding, which permitted the team to develop broad initial codes that unearthed preliminary themes. This stage was crucial as it allowed us to develop a level of interrater reliability that matured our analysis (Bhattacharya, 2010). Interrater reliability is vital because consistent with qualitative analysis, qualitative researchers' teams must achieve a consensus level to reach saturation in their collective analyses (Bhattacharya, 2010). Also, discussing meaning and inferences from narratives increases the level of critical analysis and heightens qualitative integrity. This helped to ensure that narratives were being understood/interpreted as naturally as possible. These procedures also allowed the team to access our positionality as an interlocutor of inquiry. Next, we began to mature our coding process, creating a codebook that presented more dominant themes that we analyzed and presented in the current study.

The team consisted of a Black woman and two Black males whom, aside from knowing the literature on this topic, each has a deep cultural understanding and connection with participants' racial-cultural backgrounds, which gives us additional analytical ability consistent with acquired positionality discourses (in our theoretical frames) to more deeply and forthrightly analyze narratives collected, which is a key component of rapport. Rapport embodies the level or degree of connection between the researcher and participants (Bhattacharya, 2010). Establishing "rapport" in qualitative research is integral to overcoming limitations that are created by the participants lack of trust and or connection with the interviewer, hence their willingness to be open, candid, honest, trusting, and even vulnerable in the interview, which enhances the depth of the interview data (Prior, 2018). Therefore, it is not



only the demographic factors of the researchers that enhance the rapport, it is the interviewers cultural and linguistic connection, which encompass, the empathy and relatability which are all integral to qualitative interviewing practices (Prior, 2018).

### *Participants and Demographics*

We used a self-reporting demographic sheet to collect demographic information from nine African American women (participants), whose ages ranged from 30 years old to 55 years old, with the mean age of 42 (inclusive of the 30-year-old outlier) and 47 (excluding the 30-year-old outlier). The length of time the participants spent in either jail or prison or both ranged from 45 days in jail to 6 years in prison. While most only served one stint, two of the participants reported having been incarcerated 9 and 13 times in jails and prison. Of those who self-reported the charges and convictions accordingly, three were either charged with or convicted of aggravated assault, one with/ or assault and battery, one with/ of aggravated arson, one with/ of theft by deception, one with/ of unauthorized use and possession, one with/ of an undisclosed drug offense, and one participant declined to disclose. Eight of the nine women (88%) were mothers. Of the eight mothers, one had a deceased son, and the rest had between one and six children with the mean number of children at 2.8.

As an integral part of this qualitative demographic data collection, the participants were asked to identify whether they had family support while incarcerated, felt that prison rehabilitated them, and felt that society was receptive to their return. Six participants reported having family support while incarcerated, two reported not having family support, and one did not disclose. Six participants reported feeling that prison rehabilitated them, three did not. Five participants believed that society is accepting of them, and four did not. Finally, the participants were asked to rate their mental wellbeing as a part of the demographic data, utilizing a Likert scale rating of one to five, with 1 being "very bad" mental wellbeing, 2 being "bad," 3 being "okay," 4 being "good" and five being "very good" mental wellbeing. The score range was between 2 and 5, with a mean score of 3.5.

Interestingly, the data collected from the interviews in many ways contradicted the self-report data collected on the demographic forms. However, while it is not the intent of this work to engage in the erasure or minimization of their narratives, we argue that the "contradictions" are symbolic of how Black women internalize, adapt, and cope with their traumas and lived experiences in order to survive and thrive. Thus, while many deep themes emerged from that lens, we selected the three most emergent themes at the center of



this work: the *trauma, mothering, and resilience* of formerly incarcerated Black women.

## Findings

### Trauma

*Pre-incarceration trauma.* This research uncovered that, while the participants on average ranked their “mental wellbeing” at a 3.5, which would represent the mid-range between “okay” and “good,” in their interviews, most of them expressed experiencing three types of trauma: pre-incarceration trauma, *carceral trauma*,<sup>1</sup> and post-incarceration trauma. We argue that these traumas serve as pathway factors to their incarceration, which reciprocally interact to shape their lived experience within carceral spaces and reentry.

All participants were vague about their childhood and familial experiences. Those who discussed their upbringing and past expressed experiencing trauma before being incarcerated, generally around family and community stressors. Trina, who was charged with unlawful use and possession, interestingly ranked her mental wellbeing at a 4, summed up the underlying sentiments and experiences that others more vaguely expressed when she stated:

*And I ain't going to say-things happened in your past. Some people and you gotta' learn how to, I'm not even gonna' lie to you. I'm not no longer, uh, a victim. I'm a survivor. You know what I'm saying? . . . I learned, and one thing about me, you have to forgive them because if you don't forgive them, you can't forgive yourself. And that shit will hold. . . . I used to get panic attacks, anxiety real bad. Then I had to learn. Like some people just don't know no better, you know, so change could be broken.*

Debby, who acknowledged substance abuse issues and was convicted of theft by deception, affirmed the correlation between childhood/familial trauma, substance abuse, and incarceration, which provides more depth to statistics and quantitative research about incarcerated women and non-violent drug offenses. When asked whether she believed her upbringing had anything to do with her incarceration, she stated:

*Mmm, Ima say, yeah and no. Ima say yeah because I was in a house of an upbringing of drugs and prostitution and stuff. And on the other hand, uh, with my other half of family, I was raised in the church. So I mean, I guess the more I got pushed in church that just made me run out a little bit more, and that ran me to the street life. . . . Uh, a lot of. . . people due to incarceration came from*

*homelessness, and they have fallen in trouble due to addiction, and they burned all bridges with their families, and they have nowhere to go.*

Stacey, who ranked her mental wellbeing at a 2, alluded to having been convicted of a drug offense but did not expressly state, reported:

*When I went in there, I had a habit. I went in there when I was 20 something years old. I started doing drugs when I was 13. . . But I thank God. You know what? I really thank God for me getting locked up though. You know why? Because I was running so hard. I was into that heroin and coke, that crack and all that. I believe the next step was shooting, you know? I watched the mob kill a motherfucker. Then come to their funeral and shoot their casket up. You know, I seen this with my own fucking eyes, you know what I'm saying? I've been through some shit. . . But I see all y'all niggas squatting down in the back and hallways and, um, alleyways doing this, doing that to get them drugs. I said, look, I'll do just as much drugs as y'all, but I ain't going down. I ain't! I've never sold my body.*

Roxie, who ranked her mental wellbeing as a 5, and was convicted of aggravated assault on her sister, whom she reported was trying to “take something from [her] mother,” reported that “my family has never really been there for me.” She explained that all of her family members have been incarcerated and have sold drugs, including her son. When asked if she believed that had anything to do with her addiction, she emphatically stated, “Yep,” and then explained:

*Because family members selling drugs, and you in the lifestyle, and it didn't matter. They'll sell to you. They'll sell to their own mother just so they can get that money. Even got to my son, so no, that's not good. . . it was because if your own son or your own family trying to sell you drugs, they ain't give a shit about you because if they love you, they wouldn't have sold it to you, and if they had common sense, loving others, they wouldn't try to sell to other family members as well. They didn't care. All they was looking for, the lifestyle or the money. So, they had the consequences that they had, and they dealt with it. So, they did their time. Now they come out, and they come back out doing the same shit.*

Roxie comprehensively expressed having a strained relationship with her sisters and stated that she was convicted of aggravated assault on her sister for defending her mother. Nevertheless, when she was asked whether she thought her upbringing impacted her incarceration, she reported, “No.”

Moreover, Crystal, who did not disclose her charge and ranked her mental wellbeing at 2, was extremely explicit when asked about her family and

upbringing, when she emphatically stated, *"I don't have family like that. I don't fuck with my family. I love them, but I need my space. My kids don't fuck with my family. They fucks with their mother. . . Fuck family, family ain't everything."* When she was asked whether she believed her upbringing influenced her incarceration, she stated, *"Yeah, my father, a piece of shit. He did. . . rest in peace."* Furthermore, when asked whether she wanted to delve into her father further, she replied, *"No, I'll leave that door closed."*

**Carceral trauma.** All participants who served longer stints in prison and jail expressed witnessing violence both between inmates and between inmates and guards. They also observed sexual assault and power exploitation while incarcerated. For many, it appeared to trigger trauma responses from "the street." For example, Dominique reported, *"There was an incident where the COs jumped someone and she died, and there were a few incidents where people was intimate with the COs and when it all boiled down to it, they claimed that this wasn't consensual or whatever."* Most responded and reacted to the violence they witnessed through retreat and isolation to "stay under the radar" for fear that they would become victims of violence or would be forced to defend themselves which could impact their release. When it came to witnessing violence in prison, Reginia stated:

*I just tried to mind my business, cause when I was in reception, I seen a lot, you are housed with all different types of people for all different types of crimes, and some of the people are never coming back out. . . I've seen sexual relationships. I've seen people doing drugs. I've seen people trading off their medicine for coffee or whatever. I've seen a lot of stuff in reception. I've seen violence, like violence where, where people will pick with you and you just go off and, yeah, but I'm not sacrificing my freedom for nobody.*

Trina affirmed Reginia's testimony. When asked if she witnessed violence and how she handled it, she quickly summarized, *"Oh yes, I have. . . Back up mind your business and get on your bunk. . . It's like being in the street, protect your neck."*

**Post-incarceration trauma.** Although five of the nine participants indicated that society was accepting of their return on the demographic form, this research found that many of those women identified and defined their social and familial networks as "society" and thus linked "societal acceptance" to their family and friends accepting them. However, all women, including those who identified being accepted by society, experienced post-incarceration trauma associated with reentry. In sync with the literature, this trauma included

financial and economic hardships, employment hardships, housing hardships, and continued family stress. More comprehensively, it included the disrespectful and dehumanizing treatment they expressed in the half-way houses, rehabilitation facilities, and employment. Tara explained, *"To me, the half-way house brings on emotional abuse. It's more of a mental and emotional abuse you didn't have to endure at Clinton (the prison) because as long as you're not messing with the officers, and you're humble to the inmates, you live your own life the way you see fit. . .It's horrible."* She also expressed being the victim of discrimination in the workplace, *"I actually was given a job by Dollar General, and as soon as I told him [manager] I was in a half-way house, he took the job back. Literally. Literally took the job, and took the application, and I had done all the packets, and he was like, 'No.' So, I was like, 'What happened? Because you hired me as a person that you felt was suitable, had the experience, and because I'm in a half-way house I can't. . .'"* When asked how that experience made her feel, she stated, *"Sad. It made me feel very sad because it took me back to why I'm here. It's PTSD."* Dominique, however, expressed her perception of the half-way house. *"...like a negative black cloud over the building with the staff."*

Participants also exposed how unresolved mental/psychological, emotional, and familial trauma that influenced incarceration continues to impact their successful reintegration. One participant eloquently elaborated on how half-way houses that are ill-equipped to manage residents' traumas serve as stressors and triggers. Tara explained:

*I think they kind of dig a root without allowing the flesh wound to heal. . .I'm not vibrant with opening up to certain people with certain things. . .I'm here three months. What are you going to do after I open up, and spill all these emotions, and traumas, and traumatic experiences, and you want me to journal, and write about them, and give you all of my life, and then what? You push me to the next level, which is this half-way house that has no mental treatment. They have a psych that comes in once a week and thinks everything you say is funny. . .It's not effective*

Roxie, who lost her son, was absorbing additional trauma, *"I'm still grieving now because five years ago, my son passed away. . . My feelings are all emotional. Losing my mother two years ago during Thanksgiving time, that's emotional. Everything's still fresh to me. I wake up every morning, damn, my son not here."* Amber added, *"I have to tell you the truth that I've been like depressed. I, throughout the whole time there [while incarcerated], was very depressed. I lost weight, so yeah, I've been depressed."* She added, *"I'm a little scared, I'm a little scared to be on the street [now homeless], and I*

*never been on the street before. So, I'm really trying hard to get my life right, and there's been little over eight years, and I'm really trying my best. I feel like it's not good enough. So hopefully, this program will help me through this."*

Meanwhile, Tara unpacked the trauma she deals with daily and how she once contemplated suicide, *"I definitely understand why the young man who spent three years in Rikers committed suicide [Kalief Browder] because even though he was free, I bet you at some point he didn't feel it. He felt like that heavy load never lightened. Because it's a heavy load that you carry."* The stigma of being a formerly incarcerated Black woman often resulted in participants living with a sense of daily hopelessness and defeat. Reginia shares her feelings about having a violent criminal record:

*Like right now I'm experiencing a lot of defeat, like discouragement, and I have the chips stacked against me. I'm black, I'm 44. I got a felony conviction, not even a regular felony conviction, a violent felony conviction. It's like a whole bunch of stuff stacked against me. . . Like, I don't judge anybody because I'm being judged, and it's like people are like, 'Oh well you're too negative.' I'm not even being negative. I'm just being real.*

Although participants participated in post-incarceration programming that sought to prepare to assist their return to society, several participants did not believe such programming was effective. Tara shared additional traumas about navigating transitional housing, *"In the half-way house, they don't allow us to work at temporary agencies. So, they give us more obstacles. You understand? They don't allow us to work anywhere there's children or elderly. But how am I reentering in society? Well, because you're still under DOC's watch, but what is the sense of this program then? To me, at one point, I wanted to go back to prison. I still think about it."*

While participants are no longer incarcerated, they still find it hard to escape the carceral state's tentacles. They find it challenging to find gainful employment while satisfying the terms of their parole or probation, and in many ways, they are hindered and unprepared for return to society. Reginia spoke about her challenges matriculating strict surveillance programs, *"Like I had to tell my parole officer, who's going to hire me. Like, who? I'm supposed to at the end of this month, God willing, get off this program [intensive supervision program]. And I'm like, I have no other preparation. I just served the program now and was complying to everything. Now I'm going out there to nothing."* Tara, who was seeking employment, found it hard to do so because many employers would not consider hiring her once they found out she was in a half-way house, *"I had called Quick Chek who called me for an*

interview, and I was like, 'Well, can you speak to my counselor about my interview with you so that she knows that I'm coming with you, or I can't come?' She [manager] was like, 'Well, a counselor from where?' And I'm like, 'Oh, I'm in a half-way house.' She was like, 'Oh, I'll call you. Give you a call back. I don't have my calendar in front of me.'" Unfortunately, Tara never received a call back from the potential employer. She believed she did not receive a call back because of the stigma associated with living in transitional housing.

## Mothering

Eight of the nine participants are mothers. Carceral trauma, which we define as trauma precipitated by incarceration itself, centered on the guilt, anxiety, and depression that resulted from mothers being separated from their children, no matter the age. An added pain to this trauma was the mothers' perceptions of their children's attitudes about and adaptation to their mothers' incarceration. When asked what they thought about most while incarcerated, one participant summed up all mothers' sentiments who responded to that question, Dominique stated, "*I thought about my children.*" She elaborated:

*My children suffered so much when I got incarcerated and then it just affected my entire family. . . . So my children was suffering bad with missing their mom, and relocating and losing my house, and everything. And my son, he had a panic attack and he had to get rushed to the hospital when he found out I got locked up. They all were students, all my children were suicidal, but God kept them, and I kept praying for them, and they're doing very well.*

When asked how incarceration has impacted the family unit, Joy, who did 6 years in prison, explained:

*A lot. Two of my children lived in foster care for four years of my incarceration, and they're very angry. I left when they were 13 and 11, and they're 16 and 18, and they're still very angry. My son, he was six, and he's 11 going on 12, and he cries, and he's frustrated, and he can't tell me why. They're angry. They're very hurt. They know that I was taken from them for no reason. They know the story. My son was 16, he's 21, and I remember the first time I talked to him, and he was like, 'I hate God.' I was like, 'You hate God? God ain't the reason why I'm in prison. . . .' You can't be mad at God. . . . But he still needed me. I didn't get to see him graduate high school. I wasn't there when he went to college. My 20-year-old, she's 26 now, she had to step up and be a mom, a parent to five other kids. My other daughter had a nervous breakdown, and the oldest one*

*tried to commit suicide since I've been gone. And then, my 16-year-old, she just tried to commit suicide.*

Adding to this inquiry, Stacey acknowledged that:

*I used to tell my kids, cause they was little kids. I used to tell them I'm in school, I can't come home. So, they was like, can I come back? I'm like you can't come back here, in this school. . . I used to lie to them, but when I went to prison, I wouldn't put nobody name down. I ain't want nobody to come. You know what I mean? . . . I couldn't leave with them, and I could touch them. I didn't want to go through that. You know, I wasn't, I wasn't here for my son. My son had surgery because of his asthma because it would make him have seizures and stuff. I wasn't here for that. You know what I'm saying? I missed three years of my kids' life.*

When asked whether she felt that family tension causes stress, Amber added, “No, not at all. No. They're pretty much on their own.” However, as she continued to talk, she expressed:

*. . . I haven't seen my youngest daughter; and she's not living here in Jersey as far as I know. I tried to reach out on Facebook, and I tried to reach out on Instagram, tried to reach out to her father, and nothing. I don't even know what to do anymore. Um, periodically, I'm sad and because, like I said, cause of my actions, otherwise I would see her today. It's been five years. . . I haven't seen her since 2014. October, 2014 was the last time I seen her.*

When probed on how that made her feel, she acknowledged, “I, I'm depressed, I'm distraught, I'm angry, disappointed at myself.” Amber affirmed that sentiment when she stated that she thought about her 2-month-old daughter while incarcerated, “*I cried every night thinking about her.*”

### **Recovering Mothering**

Motherhood is deeply rooted in traditional historical notions of female identity. The biological construction of being a female has historically been embedded in patriarchal sex-stereotyping constructs of traditional gender role identity. The female gender role construct of “woman” has been reliant upon the historic ways in which both her sexual agency and reproductive labor have been harnessed for patriarchal value. Consequently, the gender role constructs of wife and mother have been pivotal to a woman's gender identity, her social experience, and her self-identity (Dimmit, 2008). In those roles, which embody the gender role characteristics of nurturer, caretaker,

domestic, teacher, and emotional provider (Marks et al., 2009), women have added social value to the family as an institution and thus society. It is often through that lens, how well she performs her traditional gender roles (namely as a mother) that a woman and her value are defined both by society, and herself.

The history of enslavement which separated Black mothers from their children and prohibited them from being wives, and the accompanying stereotypes of black promiscuity and irresponsibility that inspired the “bad black mother” trope, has historically placed Black women at a disadvantage that they have been trying to overcome (Collins, 1999; hooks, 2014). As Lawson (2000) posits, “historically and presently, community mothering practices was and is a central experience in the lives of many Black women and participation in mothering is a form of emotional and spiritual expression in societies that marginalize Black women” (p. 26). Therefore, it is in accordance with the above that we identify “recovering mothering” as a principle component of incarcerated Black women’s trauma and foci—which is the expressed commitment to restoring their relationships with their children, and the added burden to their perceptions of self-worth.

The racialized ways in which Black motherhood is valued by society is even more firmly rooted in the objectification of her familial experience. Therefore, although much of Black women’s self-identity becomes rooted in motherhood once they have children, the social respect and empathy for her mother status and bond with her children is not a relevant consideration either in her sentencing, programming, or reentry. It becomes relative then that while most of the mothers in this study indicated that their children occupied their predominant thoughts while incarcerated, only one participant indicated that parenting classes were a part of the offered programs while she was incarcerated. In fact, she considered them the most “useful.” None of the participants mentioned any reunification or parental support programs available to them while incarcerated or as a part of their reentry. Nevertheless, the results of this study show that separation from their children and guilt surrounding issues on mothering were core components of the women’s carceral trauma and focus. Also, returning to active motherhood was an integral part of their reentry goals.

The emergent concept of “recovering mothering” is most thoroughly illuminated in this impassioned narrative from Reginia:

*With my two children, with my son, my 12-year-old, I have my ex-husband, he divorced me, he filled out the divorce, the same day I was coming out of the county for this crime. So, I was there cause my bond was so high. And then I came out on \$50,000 bond; once I got it to down, I was able to get bailed out.*



*The papers were signed the same day. I'm happy about that, but at the end of the day, it affected my son. He is not in the same household as me, and that's because I'm on this ISP program, and it's like I'm not stable in terms of working. I see him all the time. I'm trying to integrate them to come back over here, and he wants to come back to Englewood. But right now, I've got to take care of me. Like I gotta take care of getting a job and becoming stable so that I can support him the right way. So, it's a big effect, you know? I find that sometimes I become very snappy with people.*

“Recovering mothering,” which we define as the identified phenomena of engaging in regaining, not just the physical custody or physical motherhood of their children, but rather the psychological sense of self that is intricately linked to their role and performance as mothers. It does not just involve how Black women see themselves, but their perceptions of how society sees them, including their (sub)conscious internalizations of the stereotypical trope of the bad Black incarcerated/felon mother. Thus, the reflections of others impact their sense of self too.

This research not only supports quantitative data about the number of incarcerated women who are mothers, but it also contextualizes and humanizes the historical trauma that Black women experience when they are separated from their children, even as a result of incarceration. It further underscores their need to “recover” their mothering experience and status to resolve internal guilt, conflict, and repressed trauma caused by the separation and re-establish a level of social acceptability that leads to the recovery of deficits in their self-concept as women and mothers. How “recovering mothering” becomes an integral part of their reentry, resilience, and motivation to stay free are affirmed and aptly summarized through another participant’s testimony where she compensates for her unrecovered mothering deficits through her role as a grandmother. Stacey reveals, “*I missed three years of my kid’s life. . .but I tried to make up for it. You know what I’m saying? I tried to be a better parent. My son just had his firstborn, and he’s only two months, but my daughter got six kids cause she got two sets of twins back to back. So you know, I be trying to make it up with my grandkids. You know, I mean I try not to stay out they life or whatnot.*”

## Resilience

While resilience is often defined as one’s ability to “cope” adaptively with a crisis, to bounce back, return to pre-trauma, pre-crisis, and pre-conflict states, participants in this study experienced resilience differently. Participants’ manifestation of resilience was a unique cultural experience rooted more on

their quest for survival rather than restoration to pre-crisis states that some did not know. For example, one participant expressed that she began taking drugs at 13 years old. Therefore, the existence or tangibility of a “pre-crisis” state in her instance is questionable.

We found that many of the participants engaged in what we term “conscious traumatic repression,” meaning they consciously repress and suppress their traumatic experiences and maintain the repression as a survival mechanism. This concept was most aptly expressed when Tara questioned, “*What are you going to do after I open up, and spill all these emotions, and traumas, and traumatic experiences, and you want me to journal, and write about them, and give you all of my life, and then what?*” Alternatively, when Crystal is prodded about her relationship with her father, she responded, “*I’ll leave that door closed.*”

We argue that these phenomena are both culturally and historically rooted in family traditions and expectations of repression and silence around traumatic events in the family and community (Collins, 1999). Therefore, due to lack of access to mental health resources in reentry programs and half-way houses coupled with tradition, participants did not exhibit resilience in the traditional sense. Most still had unresolved issues with childhood and family trauma and substance abuse. Instead, they expressed a different type of resilience that we have coined, “repressive resilience,” which allows them to manage “pre-existing” stressors and traumas while negotiating the added psycho-social stressors inherent in navigating reentry and *still* survive.

These phenomena are coupled with the cultural-spiritual resilience that the participants refer to as “giving it to God” as explained by Reginia:

*I actually thought about all the wrong I’ve done people and how I can improve myself coming back out. And then it’s like I found like I had renewed faith. . . . It’s like I realized I had God with me, in them dark times. . . . Those are some dark times, and I just reaffirmed my faith with God. Like I realized like things started getting better. Things started getting better and easier. Right now, it’s not easy, but I know that God has me, I know that I’m okay. I’m still walking, still breathing, still able to go out there every day and look like I don’t have it as bad as a lot of people.*

## Discussion

While we acknowledge that women share similar experiences both within carceral spaces and after release, there is a racialized nuance to Black women’s experiences that are underrepresented in the literature. Therefore, it is not the intent of this research to negate the experiences of other women, or to

imply that they do not exist, but rather to focus on giving voice to the Black woman's experience. Subsequently, in unison with the theoretical frameworks mentioned, this study gives credence to the notion that Black women branded with the label felon or formerly incarcerated, unfortunately, live through a hyper-reality of carceral Blackness (see. e.g., Williams, 2019). As shown in this study, their experiences are viciously raced and gendered—and often ultimately attached to deep family roots that go back to tradition. Also, missing within much of the literature is the extent to which formerly incarcerated Black women's lived realities are inevitably passed down to their children (e.g., Mitchell & Davis, 2019). As historical materialism explains, ideological trickery within social institutions, designed to both help and destroy, is to blame for Black women's continual suffering and displacement in US society. Not only were Black women a historical subject of immense subjugation and terror, but these processes continue today by another name: mass incarceration and reentry. Past practices of race and gendered terror have subtly found their way back into contemporary practice by constructing policy and procedures that have coercively rendered Blacks as a collective, socio-politically futile. Through policies such as felon disenfranchisement, gerrymandering, and other such political maneuvering, Blacks have very few abilities to fight against these repressive strategies. Furthermore, learned hopelessness and helplessness that ensues from their contact with the criminal legal system teach them they cannot win. The lasting effect is a captured, subjugated subject at the mercy of those who are in control.

For instance, in this study, we observed the loss of absolute hope with participants. Due to their interlocking oppressions within the broader society and the family unit, participants noted numerous traumas (some made evident through their refusal to go further during interviews). However, these cumulative run-ins with trauma led to living with repressed trauma. We believe this is perhaps the reason why in some instances, participants did not want to go further with what happened to them—but also why others continued to engage in divergent resilient practices that amounted to what we termed *conscious traumatic repression* of their reality to survive. Despite their struggles, these women are often forced to profoundly repress their traumas to the detriment of themselves (and, by extension, those in their care) to merely survive. Consistent with our frameworks, we connect this to the traditions of Black women's struggle and survival. For generations, Black women have had to navigate troubled terrain without knowing for sure if they would be saved, and existing within a patriarchal society that is also anti-Black makes the prospect of receiving help likely uncertain. Therefore, coping mechanisms developed in ways that became increasingly self-sabotaging for some, yet simultaneously survivalist in nature. So, while they may exist

under a program of *conscious traumatic repression*, it allows them to live through the pain beneath the delusion of erasure and freedom. For these participants, this manifested as a most egregious consequence and terror of being formerly incarcerated and a Black woman in US society—for those who were mothers, the effects of this terror were immeasurable.

Many participants engaged recovery mothering, which they saw as a must-achieve for their “past failures” of not being there for their children. Nevertheless, many of them were unable to connect their “past failures” with larger institutional barriers that prevented their mothering or the intergenerational intervention US society, and policy has long played in Black motherhood in general. Nevertheless, the act of recovery mothering played a significant role in the suffering of these mothers. Many of them felt they could never reach actual motherhood status again due to their newfound status as “ex-cons.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, as mothers, society places expectations upon them that they must achieve despite barriers that come along with being formerly incarcerated. Aside from societal expectations, many of them had to absorb expectations from their children and extended families, as mothers. The cumulative effect of all gender-role expectations alongside troubles they faced in the criminal legal system, produced tremendous pressure that enflamed their existing interlocking oppressions. Many were tempted to reengage past self-sabotaging behaviors that led them into the criminal legal system or their families to disengage with them. Thus, after having navigated incarceration, their plight back to motherhood appeared to be as equally criminalizing as the illegal act itself.

Resilience for these participants came in the form of spiritual belief and recognizing the small things in life. However, we underscore the harm in this acceptance of reality for these participants, as it locates them back to a reality in which their forebearers lived on plantations. For instance, during slavery, Black women faced a tremendous threat of terror and often depended on otherworldly sustainability sources. However, drawing from our frameworks, we argue that the toleration of Black women in this unique state of depression serves both a material and ideological purpose. It devalues their status as Black, women, and mothers. It constructs formerly incarcerated Black mothers as unfit in the eyes of their children and families. For aspiring Black mothers, the effects of mass incarceration are a core reproductive justice issue in many ways but not limited to biological, physiological, psychological, and sociological contexts. Thus, consistent with regimes under slavery, the outcomes of the current order are qualitatively similar such that it breaks the full spirit and body of its Black women victims and limits their ability to live authentically.

Although our participants are said to be free because they are no longer incarcerated, their narratives uncover a collective story that is all too reminiscent of their ancestors who came before them. Historical materialism, CRT, and intersectionality, as theoretical and analytical frameworks, allowed us to critically contextualize narratives within a context consistent with our participants' authentic lived experiences. These frameworks uncovered how institutional machinery behaved unfavorably against Black women. Through our critical analysis, we learned that our participants were under the control of a system (formal and informal) that wantonly pursued a prejudicial and dangerous program against their livelihood. These frameworks do not accept the hypothesis that the criminal legal system operates in a value-neutral manner. Moreover, the default of neutrality would be *inconsistent* with both history and African Americans' lived reality in general. Therefore, the analysis of marginalized groups must account for their genuine experience and matriculation through social institutions, especially those charged with administering social control.

In summation, systematic change cloaked within the tradition of CRT must occur if Black women such as those in this study are ever to receive peace. However, such change must be foregrounded in the genuine reconciliation of centuries-old interlocking oppressions that Black women have faced in US society. The acknowledgment of violence against Black women must not be limited to the physical variety but inclusive to those unseen. Until such change occurs, Black women (also increasingly targets of mass incarceration) will continue to be at risk of being reconstructed as ex-con, "deviant" women—unfit for motherhood or womanhood, and, therefore, under the current patriarchal order, disposable.

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### Notes

1. We define carceral trauma as trauma that is uniquely experienced in carceral spaces.

2. Not only is ex-con a term that participants themselves utilized to define their social status; but consistent with labeling theories, the term ex-con reflects the social stigma attached to formerly incarcerated people.

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